

THE MIND OF THE TERRORIST

By Aaron T. Beck

The deadly attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 is one of the major events of the new millennium. The terrifying image of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center exploding after being struck by hijacked airliners has left much of the country in a state of shellshock. This horrendous disaster calls for a careful analysis of the mind of the terrorists.

To start with, it is important to recognize that terrorists who execute well-planned acts of destruction are not deranged. Nonetheless, their thinking may be compared and contrasted with that of individuals who engage in individual or group violence. A husband who beats his wife or members of a lynch mob are highly aroused emotionally. They are angry with the victim and their anger feeds their violence. In contrast, disciplined terrorists such as those who assaulted the structures in New York and Washington are not necessarily filled with rage. They are cold and calculating in carrying out their grand design and are relatively indifferent to their victims. For them, the end justifies the means. Their mission to harm the enemy transcends any concern about the victims. In fact, it is likely that, as in conventional war, success is measured partly in terms of the body count. In a sense, they share the same psychology as Timothy McVeigh, responsible for bombing the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

What then is the psychology of the terrorist? It is crucial to understand that their ideology has taken over a significant proportion of what they think and do. Somewhat like the domestic Communist spies in the United States and Britain during World War II and the Cold War, the Islamic terrorists are able to assume a dual identity. Outwardly they may appear like everybody else (one of the hijackers went to bars and strip joints with his German buddies – even though this was contrary to the Muslim faith). The action manual used by bin Laden terrorists in previous bombings specifically ordered them to blend into the country which was targeted for attack. However, their core identity remained dedicated to destructive acts programmed by their ideology of hate.

Crucial to understanding violent acts of any type is the perpetrators' view of the victim: the image of the Enemy. The offenders regard themselves as the victims and the Enemy as the victimizers. The image of the United States as a hostile superpower, armed with weapons of mass destruction, is seen as a threat to the existence of the Islamic states. The American penetration into Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War attack on Iraq, in addition to our support of the oppression of Palestinians by the "murderous" state of Israel, have inflicted a deep wound, calling for revenge. Further, the continuing sanctions imposed on Iraq indicate to the terrorists our own indifference to the suffering of the innocent civilians.

They see Western Culture, especially that of the United States, as repugnant to everything dear to them. The perceived materialism, liberation of women, secularism, and so on represent a threat to their most highly held values derived from their interpretation of the Qur'an. Their interpretation of our malevolent motives driving our intervention, oppression, and corruption of their values help to crystallize the mental representations that energize the terrorists' violence. America becomes like a screen onto which is projected the image of the Enemy: vicious, corrupting, dangerous. As this image solidifies, their own collective self-image is enhanced – holy, righteous, and good. Moral and religious symbols permeate the thinking. The images may take a dramatic form: the forces of evil versus the forces of good; Satan versus Allah. The prescribed remedy for these grave grievances is violence against the perpetrators, oppressors, corrupters.

Islamic radicals who become obsessed with these polarized images become prime candidates for recruitment for assignments of assault on the Enemy. Of course, what they are attacking is the image of the Enemy that is projected onto the innocent civilians. They have demonized their antagonists and dehumanized its people.

The thinking of the terrorist evidently shows some of the cognitive faults or distortions observed in others who engage in violent acts, either solely as individuals or as members of a group. These include overgeneralization – that is, the supposed sins of the Enemy may spread to encompass the entire population. Also, they show dichotomous thinking – a people is either totally good or totally bad. Finally, they demonstrate tunnel vision – once they are engaged in their holy mission (e.g., jihad), the only objective they can envision is the destruction of the target. They behave like robots programmed for demolition with no attention to the significance of the human lives that are destroyed, including their own. In fact, like the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II, they undoubtedly are gratified by the heroic role that destiny has accorded them. Bin Laden, himself, stated in an interview that he would be happy to die as a martyr.

The planners of the violent attacks – wherever they may be – had their own geopolitical aspirations in mind; possibly to evoke a retaliatory strike by the United States that will mobilize the Muslim world to a jihad against this evil Superpower. Perhaps they simply aspired to destabilize the government and harm the economy. In any event, the executors of the plan – the hijackers – did not need to know the ultimate goal. What was required was that they see themselves as part of a grand design that is more important than themselves and that they consolidate the image of America as the Enemy. By manipulating these images, the leaders like bin Laden are empowered to neutralize the technological and economic superiority of the Superpower and (hopefully) to humiliate it, if not bring it down.

Our perspective of the psychology of the terrorist needs to be extended to the polarized thinking of the militant groups that produce the terrorists. In addition to the national policy of punishing and containing terrorism, we must pay attention to the impact of our actions on the thinking and beliefs of the militant groups. In this way we may be able to predict their responses to our actions.